



## THE ROLE AND IMPORTANCE OF TERMINOLOGY IN THE STUDY OF SPECIALIZED LANGUAGE

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### ABSTRACT

*Terminology plays an important role in the understanding of contexts and specialized texts. Understanding the intricate terminological details of the technical and scientific contexts helps students comprehend what the main message of the document is, and it helps specialists to transmit the content more effectively. Terminology helps individuals realize the interaction between the units of specialized texts and the whole context which is often a subconscious mechanism of knowledge acquisition. It also develops interests in the formation of new words and terms. Specialists in documentation and information science, as well as linguists practicing in language engineering and thematically specialized knowledge also require terminology. Even those general or theoretical linguists if they try to account for the global competence (general and specialized) of speakers and languages thoroughly they require to know about terminology" and specialized languages.*

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### 1. Introduction

Terminology language is more than a technical or particular instance of general language. In today's society with its emphasis on science and technology, the way specialized knowledge concepts are named, structured, described, and translated has put terminology or the designation of specialized knowledge concepts in the

limelight. The information in scientific and technical texts is encoded in terms or specialized knowledge units, which are access points to more complex knowledge structures. Underlying the information in the text are entire conceptual domains, which are both explicitly and implicitly present, and which represent the specialized knowledge encoded. In order to create a specialized text, translators and technical writers must have an excellent grasp of the language in the conceptual domain, the content that must be transmitted, and

the knowledge level of the addressees or text receivers. In order to translate a specialized language text, translators must go beyond correspondences at the level of individual terms, and be able to establish interlinguistic references to entire knowledge structures. Only then can they achieve the level of understanding necessary to create an equivalent text in the target language.

There has been a great deal of debate regarding how much a translator or technical writer really needs to know about the specialized domain in order to translate or write about a scientific or technical text. Some people even seem to believe that such texts should only be translated or written by experts in the field because, in their opinion, it is impossible for non-experts to acquire the necessary knowledge.

Although it is not infrequent for experts with an acceptable level of a second language to try to write or translate texts because of their knowledge of terminological correspondences, they generally find that writing an article in another language is far from simple. Similarly, there are writers or translators who believe that their syntactic and semantic knowledge of one or more languages guarantees an adequate scientific or technical text in the same language or another language without any other previous preparation or documentation. Both endeavors can be extremely difficult to perform successfully. Terminological units and their correspondences possess both paradigmatic and syntagmatic structure. In other words, terms not only represent specialized concepts, but also have syntax and collocational patterns within general language. In this sense, merely knowing terminological correspondences is often not enough since such units, when inserted in context, affect the text at all levels.

However, it also must be said that linguistic knowledge in itself is not a sufficient guarantee to produce an acceptable text in a specialized knowledge field. A translator or technical writer must likewise be aware of the types of conceptual entities that the text is referring to, the events that they are participating in, and how they are interrelated. This signifies that writers and translators of specialized texts must also be closet terminologists and be capable of carrying out terminological management as a means of knowledge acquisition. This is one of the reasons why an understanding of terminology and specialized knowledge representation is a key factor in successful scientific and technical text generation and translation.

Terminology as a discipline of study is a relative newcomer. In fact, it came into being because of the growing need to facilitate specialized communication and translation, as well as knowledge transfer between text users belonging to different language communities and with similar knowledge levels. The theoretical proposals in this field

have been mostly practice-based, and focus on the elaboration of glossaries, specialized dictionaries as well as terminological and translation resources. According to Cabré (2000a: 37), "as a subject field with explicit premises, terminology emerges from the need of technicians and scientists to unify the concepts and terms of their subject fields in order to facilitate professional communication and the transfer of knowledge".<sup>1</sup> Precisely for this reason, Terminology has been for some time a discipline in search of a theory with premises capable of accounting for specialized knowledge representation, category organization, and description, as well as the semantic and syntactic behavior of terminological units in one or various languages. Over the years, this quest for a set of theoretical principles has led terminologists to ask themselves *inter alia* whether Terminology should be regarded as a branch of Philosophy, Sociology, Cognitive Science, or Linguistics. Rather than say that Terminology may stem from any or all of them, we take the position that Terminology is essentially a linguistic and cognitive activity. In this sense, terms are linguistic units which convey conceptual meaning within the framework of specialized knowledge texts. In the understanding of the nature of terms, this process of meaning transmission is as important as the concept or concepts that they designate. Terminological units are thus subject to linguistic analysis. Since this type of analysis can be carried out in a number of ways, it is necessary to choose the linguistic approach most in consonance with the object of study. Such an approach should be lexically-centered and usage-based. It should also have its primary focus on meaning and conceptual representation. As shall be seen, such is the case of theoretical approaches based on Cognitive Linguistics. In the past, Terminology and Linguistics have mostly ignored each other. In its initial phase, Terminology was interested in asserting its independence from other knowledge areas, and creating a totally autonomous discipline. This goal led terminologists to go to great lengths to emphasize differences between Terminology and Lexicology even to the extent of affirming that terms are not words. In a parallel way, linguistic theory has largely ignored Terminology, probably because specialized language has been and is often regarded as merely a special case of general language. Thus, it was not considered worthy of serious study because anything pertaining to general language was also presumed to be true of specialized language.

As has often been observed, terminology means many things to many people.<sup>2</sup> Terminology is a word that can either begin with an upper or lowercase letter. When terminology begins with a small t, it refers to the units in any specialized knowledge field. When it begins with a large T, it refers to the study of specialized language. As a rule,

<sup>1</sup> to Cabré (2000a: 37)

<sup>2</sup> (Sager 1994: 7)

Terminology theories can be classified as either prescriptive or descriptive. General Terminology Theory, which has the virtue of being the first theoretical proposal in this area, is essentially prescriptive in nature. As shall be seen, the theories that subsequently arose in reaction to the General Terminology Theory are descriptive, and show an increasing tendency to incorporate premises from Cognitive Linguistics since they focus on the social, communicative, and cognitive aspects of specialized knowledge units. The vision that they offer is more realistic because they analyze terms as they actually appear and behave in texts. One might say that these new theories are representative of a cognitive shift in terminology.

Terminology as a discipline began in the 1930's with Eugen Wüster, the author of *The Machine Tool, an Interlingual Dictionary of Basic Concepts*<sup>3</sup>, a systematically organized French and English dictionary of standardized terms (with a German supplement) intended as a model for future technical dictionaries. This multi-volume work inspired the General Terminology Theory, and set out the initial set of principles for the compilation and description of terminological data with a view to the standardization of scientific language. The General Terminology Theory was later developed in Vienna by Wüster's successors, who interpreted his ideas and carried on his work. Although for many years, the General Terminology Theory offered the only set of principles and premises for compiling terminological data, its view of the semantics of terminological units projected a uniformly limited representation of specialized knowledge concepts without allowing for their multidimensional nature. Needless to say, the General Terminology Theory did not attempt to account for the syntax and pragmatics of specialized language, which was not regarded as relevant. In this sense, it could not be usefully applied to translation or specialized text generation. The General Terminology Theory focused on specialized knowledge concepts for the description and organization of terminological information. Within this framework, concepts were viewed as being separate from their linguistic designation (terms). Concepts were conceived as abstract cognitive entities that refer to objects in the real world, and terms were merely their linguistic labels. As Terminology struggled to acquire a semi-independent status, a considerable amount of effort was invested in distinguishing specialized language from general language and in differentiating terms from words. This radical emphasis on differences often seemed to convey the idea that terms were not even language at all, but rather abstract symbols referring to concepts in the real world.

The general claim is that a term or a specialized language unit can be distinguished from a general language word by its single-meaning relationship with the specialized

concept that it designates and by the stability of the relationship between form and content in texts dealing with this concept.<sup>4</sup>

However, this is an extremely idealized vision of specialized communication. Even the most cursory examination of specialized language texts shows that terminological variation is quite frequent, and that such variation seems to stem from parameters of specialized communication, such as the knowledge and prestige of the speakers, text function, text content, user group, etc. The same concept can often be designated by more than one term, and the same linguistic form can be used to refer to more than one concept. Furthermore, terms have distinctive syntactic projections and can behave differently in texts, depending on their conceptual focus. This is something that happens in texts of all languages, and is a problem that translators and technical writers inevitably have to deal with.

We believed that the function of Terminology was to create and standardize names for concepts, syntax was not regarded as falling within the scope of Terminology. The General Terminology Theory also regarded Terminology as exclusively synchronic, and thus ignored the diachronic dimension of terms. Wüster's principal objectives (in Cabré 2003: 173) were:

! “To eliminate ambiguity from technical languages by means of standardization of terminology in order to make them efficient tools of communication;

! To convince all users of technical languages of the benefits of standardized terminology;

! To establish terminology as a discipline for all practical purposes and to give it the status of a science”. Cabré (2000a: 169) rightly points out that Terminology has suffered from a lack of innovative theoretical contributions because until very recently, there has been little or no theoretical discussion or confrontation of opinions.

The fifth reason, which may explain the continued homogeneity of the established principles, is the lack of interest in terminology by specialists of other branches of science, for example linguistics, psychology, philosophy and history of science and even communication and discourse studies. For many years terminology saw itself as a simple practice for satisfying specific needs or as a field of knowledge whose signs had nothing to do with the signs of language.

However, the 1990s brought new proposals and ideas that paved the way to integrating Terminology into a wider social, communicative, and linguistic context. According to L'Homme, Heid, and Sager. (2003), examples of such approaches are Socioterminology (Boulanger 1991; Guespin 1991; Gaudin 1993, 2003), the Communicative Theory of Terminology (Cabré 2000a, 2000b, 2001a, 2001b,

<sup>3</sup> (Wüster 1968)

<sup>4</sup> (Pavel and Nolet 2001:19).

2003; Cabré et al. 1998), and Sociocognitive Terminology (Temmerman 1997, 2000, 2001, 2006).

In the early 1990's Socio terminology and Communicative Terminology Theory appeared on the horizon as a reaction to the hegemony of the General Terminology Theory. Both theories present a more realistic view of terminology since they base their description on how terms are actually used in communicative contexts. They describe terminological units in real discourse and analyze the sociological and discourse conditions that give rise to different types of texts.

Socioterminology, as proposed by Gaudin (1993), applies sociolinguistic principles to Terminology theory, and accounts for terminological variation by identifying term variants against the backdrop of different usage contexts<sup>5</sup>. Parameters of variation are based on the social and ethnic criteria in which communication among experts and specialists can produce different terms for the same concept and more than one concept for the same term. Pihkala (2001) points out that the socio terminological approach focuses on the social and situational aspects of specialized language communication, which may affect expert communication and give rise to term variation. According to socio terminologists, standardization is a chimera since language is in constant change. Polysemy and synonymy are inevitably present in terminology and specialized texts, and the use of one term instead of another can reflect the knowledge, social, and professional status of a group of users, as well as the power relationships between participants in the communicative interaction. It can also reflect the geographic and temporal location of the text sender or originator. Terminological variation inevitably highlights the fact that concept systems and definitions are not static. This is a reality that any theory aspiring to explanatory adequacy must deal with. In this respect, the premises of Socio terminology are closely linked to Gregory and Carroll's (1978: 3-4) characterization of linguistic variation according to use and user even though this reference is not explicitly mentioned. Although Socio terminology does not aspire to independent theoretical status, its importance resides in the fact that it opened the door for other descriptive theories of Terminology, which also take social and communicative factors into account, and which base their theoretical principles on the way terms are actually used in specialized discourse. Linguistics and Terminology began to draw closer to each other with the Communicative Theory of Terminology (Cabré 1999a, 1999b, 1999c, 2000a, 2000b, 2001a, 2001b, 2003; Cabré et al. 1998). This proposal is more ambitious than Socioterminology and endeavors to account for the complexity of specialized knowledge units from a social, linguistic, and cognitive perspective. According to Cabré

(2003), a theory of Terminology should provide a methodological framework for the study of terminological units. She underlines the fact that specialized knowledge units are multidimensional, and have a cognitive component, a linguistic component, and a sociocommunicative component. In this respect, they behave like general language words. Their specificity resides in a series of cognitive, syntactic, and pragmatic constraints, which affirm their membership in a specialized domain. In this sense, the Communicative Theory of Terminology regards terminological units as "sets of conditions" *à l'au*"(Cabré 2003: 184) derived from, inter alia, their particular knowledge area, conceptual structure, meaning, lexical and syntactic structure, and valence, as well as the communicative context of specialized discourse. Cabré (2003) proposes the Theory of the Doors, a metaphor representing the possible ways of accessing, analyzing, and understanding terminological units. She compares a terminological unit to a polyhedron, a three dimensional solid figure with a varying number of facets. Similarly, a terminological unit can also be said to have three dimensions: a cognitive dimension, a linguistic dimension, and a communicative dimension. Each is a separate door through which terminological units can be accessed. Nonetheless, one's choice of door (or focus) does not entail a rejection of the other two perspectives, which continue to reside in the background. According to Cabré, the Communicative Theory of Terminology approaches units through the language door, but always within the general context of specialized communication. At this time the Communicative Theory of Terminology is probably the best candidate to replace the General Theory of Terminology as a viable, working theory of Terminology. It has led to a valuable body of research on different aspects of Terminology such as conceptual relations, terminological variation, term extraction, and the application of different linguistic models to Terminology. This has helped Terminology as a field to get its act together, and begin to question the premises of General Terminology Theory, which previously were not open to doubt or criticism. However, the Communicative Theory of Terminology is not without its shortcomings. Despite its clear description of the nature of terminological units and the fact that it mentions a term's "syntactic structure and valence", the Communicative Theory of Terminology avoids opting for any specific linguistic model. The relation of the Communicative Theory of Terminology to Linguistics is more in the nature of a light flirtation with various models than a monogamous relationship with any one model in particular. Its view of conceptual semantics is also in need of clarification. Although in a very general way, the Communicative Theory of Terminology bases its semantics

<sup>5</sup> Gaudin (1993)

on conceptual representation, it is more than a little vague when it comes to explaining how such representations are created, what they look like, and what constraints they might have: Cabré (2003:189) states that the knowledge structure of specialized discourse could be represented as a conceptual map formed by nodes of knowledge, which can be represented by different types of units of expression, and by relations between these nodes. Within this framework, terminological units are recognized as such because they represent knowledge nodes of a structure, and have a special meaning in this structure. If these factors are the prerequisites for term status, then one would think that conceptual representation, knowledge structure or ontology, and category organization would be an extremely important part of the Communicative Theory of Terminology. However, this does not seem to be the case.

Another area in need of clarification in the Communicative Theory of Terminology is semantic meaning. According to this theory, a lexical unit is general by default and acquires a specialized meaning when it appears in a specific type of discourse. A terminological unit is regarded as the specialized meaning of a lexical unit since its meaning is extracted from the “set of information of a lexical unit” (Cabré 2003: 184). With this affirmation, the Communicative Theory of Terminology seems to be avoiding the question of what specialized meaning is and what its components are. The only clue is when Cabré (2003:190) states that terminological meaning consists of a specific “selection of semantic features according to the conditions of every speech act”, which seems to implicitly say that she is in favor of some type of semantic decomposition. However, this can only be a supposition because nothing is explicitly said about the semantic analysis of specialized language units. This is a comfortable position because it shunts any decisions in this respect back into the realm of Lexical Semantics, where there is already considerable disagreement as to the nature of word meaning and how it should be analyzed.

Over the last decade, linguistic theory seems to be in the process of undergoing a cognitive shift<sup>6</sup>, which has led it to increasingly focus on the conceptual network underlying language. The fact that linguistic form cannot be divorced from meaning has led linguists to begin to explore the interface between syntax and semantics (Faber and Mairal Usón 1999). This trend is also present in the area of Terminology. Cognitive-based Terminology theories, though similar in some ways to the Communicative Theory of Terminology, also differ from it. It is not an accident that

such theories have arisen largely in the context of Translation. Despite the fact that they also focus on terms in texts and discourse, they make an effort to integrate premises from Cognitive Linguistics and Psychology in their accounts of category structure and concept description. Relevant proposals in this area are Sociocognitive Terminology (Temmerman 1997, 2000, 2006) and Frame-based Terminology (Faber, Márquez Linares, and Vega Expósito 2005; Faber et al. 2006, 2007; Faber and León Araúz 2010; Faber 2011).

## Conclusion

Indeed, the use of terminology is not limited to specialists and the terminology knowledge is not only needed by terminologists, translators, and linguists. However, the type of knowledge we need depends on our professional activities and the motivations for learning. In this process, the role of institutions and academic centers is significant. Their competency in offering diverse materials aiming at distinct groups of learners with different backgrounds is one of the most important characteristics that we should take into account.

This competency in offering various opportunities for terminology learners, basically, is predicated on the polyhedral nature of terminology (In Cabré's terms, 2002) and it is important to perceive terminology in its triple aspect:

As a need or rather, as a set of needs associated with information and communication.

As a practice or set of practices that fall into particular applications, such as vocabularies.

As a field of knowledge which is subject to being treated scientifically not only in its theoretical aspect but also in its descriptive and applied aspect.

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<sup>6</sup> (Evans and Green 2006)